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Enhancing international collaboration among early-career researchers

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Abstract

Objective—The European Association of Communication in Healthcare (EACH) Early Career Researchers Network (ECRN) aims are to (1) promote international collaboration among young investigators and (2) provide a support network for future innovative communication research projects. In October 2009, Miami, USA at a workshop facilitated by the ECRN at the International Conference on Communication in Healthcare (ICCH) hosted by the American Academy of Communication in Healthcare we explored common facilitators and challenges faced by early career researchers in health communication research.

Methods—Attendees introduced themselves, their research area(s) of interest, and listed one facilitator and one barrier for their career development. EACH ECRN members then led a discussion of facilitators and challenges encountered in communication research projects and career development. We discussed potential collaboration opportunities, future goals, and activities.

Results—Having supportive collegial relationships, institutional support, job security, and funding are critical facilitators for early career investigators. Key challenges include difficulty with time management and prioritizing, limited resources, and contacts.

Conclusion—International collaboration among early career researchers is a feasible and effective means to address important challenges, by increasing opportunities for professional support and networking, problem-solving, discussion of data, and ultimately publishing.

Practice Implications—Future AACH-EACH Early Career Researcher Networks should continue to build collaborations by developing shared research projects, papers, and other scholarly products.

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Keywords

Early career development; collaboration; communication research; EACH, AACH

1. Introduction

In September 2008 a pre-conference workshop was held in Oslo, Norway with the aim of stimulating communication between investigators to exchange ideas, discuss research and career training activities, and create a network. Prior to the inaugural workshop in Oslo 2008, EACH defined early career researchers as researchers who had not yet completed their PhD or who were within 2 years of completion of their doctoral thesis. Thus the EACH Early Career Researchers Network (ECRN) was formed consisting of eight researchers from around the world, each building expertise in healthcare communication research. Senior researchers from the EACH Research Committee (R-EACH) served as facilitators and supervisors during the workshop. The common link among group members was that we were all early career researchers engaged in healthcare communication research. We established the following aims of our network: to (1) promote international collaboration among young investigators and (2) provide a support network to produce future innovative communication research projects.

Collaboration in the scientific environment is growing rapidly, when defined and measured through multi-author and multi-address publications.¹ Collaboration is a mutually beneficial professional relationship; the persons involved ultimately determine the specific nature, tasks, or activities through which collaboration occurs.^{2–4} The literature indicates a correlation between high productivity in terms of published papers and high levels of collaboration.¹ There are several reasons for positive outcomes due to collaboration. First, collaboration between researchers can enhance a transfer of knowledge and expertise. Second, it can increase efficiency as co-authors contribute individual but different expertise to the research problem or findings reducing time required to complete papers, projects, or proposals. Third, it can function as a cross-fertilization of ideas, provide intellectual companionship, and extend one's individual network. Fourth, in collaborations one can also learn how to manage social and management skills in a team.¹ Finally, collaboration allows investigators to meet and share both setbacks and successes creating a positive energy that is important and useful in all research.

A recent study exploring collaboration among academic medical faculty in the US found that early career faculty faced numerous barriers to collaboration, such as institutional hierarchy and lack of infrastructural support.⁵ Another study showed that female medical school faculty (both physician and non-physician) neither advance as rapidly nor are compensated as well as their male counterparts.⁶ Collaborative teamwork, therefore, may lead to greater recognition and rewards, both for scientific discoveries and professional development.

The EACH ECRN has several ingredients to enhance an individual's success. It can potentially help transfer knowledge and expertise since it represents a variety of professional backgrounds in psychology, social sciences, nursing, conventional, and integrative medicine. The network also globally extends an individual's own local network since members are from Germany, the United Kingdom, the Netherlands, Sweden, Australia, the United States, and Iran. Additionally, the network creates opportunities for cross-fertilization, because Network members currently work on a diverse range of health communication research: the effects of tailored information; low literacy populations; gender dyads; empathy in education and patient care; communication about evidence in healthcare consultations; communication in accident and emergency departments; and communication about physical activity and other health behaviors. Network members can exchange expertise in methodologies, since they use a variety

of study designs, and methods. Taken together, the ECRN has the potential to enhance an individual member's success with data analysis, project design, proposal preparation and publication of results.

In this paper we describe the results of the interest group discussion at the ICCH 2009 conference. We report the facilitators and challenges that early career investigators experience in career development and discuss the potential of the ECRN to overcome some of these challenges.

2. Methods

2.1 EACH Early Career Research Network Interest Group

We, members of the EACH ECRN, convened our first interest group for early career researchers on communication research at the annual AACH-sponsored International Conference on Communication in Healthcare in Miami, USA in October 2009. This interest group invited early career conference delegates with a diverse range of health communication research topics, methodologies, and outcomes. Our goal was to form an interest group to address issues important to early career researchers from a variety of training backgrounds and disciplines. Our objective was to discuss international experiences and perspectives on career development, and give an opportunity to exchange ideas about career development specifically focused on early career health communication researchers. Each attendee at the interest group self-identified as an early career researcher.

We organized our interest group discussion in the following manner: First, all attendees briefly introduced themselves, their research area(s) of interest, and their reasons/goals for attending the interest group meeting. Then, current EACH ECRN members facilitated a discussion of successes and challenges of attendees' communication research projects and career training activities. We also discussed international experiences of the network, giving an opportunity to discuss career development within health communication research for early career researchers. Finally, we identified some steps to meet the challenges early career researchers face, and future directions for possible collaboration.

We facilitated the discussion by asking the following questions: (1) What successes and/or resources do we have which facilitate our career development? (2) What challenges do we face in research/career development? (3) How can collaboration help us to overcome challenges and what should be our future goals and activities to promote collaboration amongst members of our network and interest group?

3. Results

We had a very active, lively, and candid discussion amongst the participants who attended. Demographic and qualifications of attendees are listed in Table 1. Below, we present a summary of the group's discussion in response to these questions.

3.1 Facilitators to communication research career development

We discussed many important facilitators that the group considered essential to successful research and career development (see Box 1). Participants felt strongly that supportive relationships with departmental colleagues, along with institutional support, were critical elements of research career development. Having job security and funding were also top priorities. The ability to develop networks of colleagues beyond institutional boundaries was also seen as important to expanding opportunities for writing, generating proposals, and discussing ideas and research findings.

Box 1**Facilitators to communication research career development**

- Networking and effective teamwork within one's own department
- Meeting and interacting with national and international colleagues
- Having supportive relationships with mentors and supervisors
- Having strong departmental and institutional support
- Attending graduate student/trainee meetings on a regular (e.g. monthly) basis
- Being free to pursue novel research ideas
- Having job security
- Having funding for research
- Availability of supervisors who are well known in the field of healthcare communication
- Being a part of networks such as EACH and other communication networks

3.2 Challenges to communication research career development

We also discussed many challenges to research career development (see Box 2). The key challenges that participants experienced were struggling with time management, maintaining balance, and keeping priorities in focus. Participants also expressed concerns about job (in) security, and difficulty obtaining funding as threats to successful research career development. Also, the group discussed the challenge of lack of sufficient support or resources to develop research proposals and prepare manuscripts for publication. Finally, balancing personal and work life was experienced as an important challenge.

Box 2**Challenges to communication research career development**

- Time management; maximizing effective use of available time to be productive
- Lack of knowledge amongst supervisors, colleagues and/or institution about one's research content area
- Balancing research, funding and teaching or clinical obligations; keeping priorities aligned with actual work activities
- How to get articles published/ no support in publishing papers
- Continuing research after PhD or MD training is complete
- Gaining or maintaining funding for research projects
- Lack of support in writing grant proposals
- Lack of expertise or availability of supervisors for mentoring
- Job insecurity (i.e., having a temporary contract)
- Lack of support within one's institution; being alone
- Balancing one's personal life and work life

3.3 Future goals and activities

As a result of the discussion on facilitators and challenges, the group generated several creative ideas for both overcoming challenges and laying the groundwork for future productive collaborations. Our future goals and activities are summarized in Box3 3.

Box 3

Future goals and activities of the EACH Early Career Researchers Network

1. Enhance the international perspectives on career development within health communication research
 - Offer Interest Groups for discussion and network possibilities at future EACH/AACH meetings.
 - Expand the program at future EACH/AACH meetings to contain more items aimed at Early Career Researchers.
 - Highlight early career researchers as an important resource of EACH/AACH.
2. Expand the EACH ECR Network for mutual support and consultation
 - We created a list of attendees of the interest group of the EACH Early Career Researchers Network and circulated individuals' contact information for follow-up from the interest group discussion.
 - We developed an on-line message board as a forum to contact each other, ask questions, seek support, share documents, continue networking and make announcements. This group website is embedded in the EACH sharepoint environment.
 - We are compiling a list of resources (both individual and shared) available for Network members. These resources include a directory of network members with information about members' professional backgrounds, research areas of interest, skills or resources to share, and requests (such as, "I need data", "I need access to populations", "more publication/paper-writing support"). This directory is posted on the group website where members can update or revise items as needed.
 - We will actively solicit ideas and feedback from Network members on an ongoing basis to create goals and foster collaborations that are mutually beneficial. The EACH/AACH conferences offer a venue to meet face to face with other early career researchers, maintain and forge new connections, and develop working groups over the Internet.

4. Discussion and conclusion

4.1 Discussion

Our interest group discussion highlighted the importance of a supportive work environment (e.g., productive relationships at the departmental, institutional, and wider network levels) and the freedom to pursue novel ideas. Additionally, resources such as secure funding were cited as major facilitators. These findings correspond with those of Bland et al., who described that a supportive work environment with a high level of individual freedom lead to creative and productive work environments. These are key factors which distinguish productive academic medical professionals from the less productive.⁷ The facilitators that were identified also

correspond well to those of Archer⁸ who distilled life lessons from five groups of Nobel laureates in medicine and physiology, revealing the essence of the practices and philosophies that allowed these ‘ordinary’ people to achieve the extraordinary. One recommendation in his article was to establish research teams and partnerships:

“Young physician-scientists are well-advised to join a thematic research group, which will become their scientific support network. The group may be large or a folie a deux, but should be ‘real’, not assembled merely to acquire funding. A true group attacks problems of mutual interest, sharing ideas and resources, and co-publishing.”

Participation in the ECRN might help early career researchers to overcome several important challenges. Given the different backgrounds and countries of the network participants, the network can help to overcome the lack of expertise and collaborations. Additionally, participants could share resources, e.g. data. Also, by writing papers and research proposals together, it might be possible to save time and increase chances for success when compared to individual efforts. Some challenges, as others have also reported,⁹ might be harder to overcome, e.g. balancing work and personal life. However, social support to share challenging experiences with peers might be beneficial. In sum, the ECRN holds promise for early career researchers to overcome important challenges by providing opportunities to share expertise and build collaborations, participation in the network might therefore be an important strategy for early career researchers to build their careers.

4.2 Conclusion

In our interest group discussion, key themes were the recognition of limited time, resources and contacts, which pose challenges to the professional development of early career researchers. Yet, we also identified many shared interests, knowledge, and resources among the early-career investigators present to address these challenges. Thus, international collaboration between early career researchers can be a tool to overcome some of the challenges, especially concerning the challenges of lack of expertise, lack of collaborations for proposal writing, and publishing.

4.3 Practice Implications

We recommend that the current ECRN and future AACH-EACH early career networks build upon these initial collaborations by developing shared research projects, papers, and other scholarly products.

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Table 1

Workshop attendees

	N
Attendees	20
Female	18
Country of residence	
• UK	2
• UK USA	8
• Netherlands	4
• Germany	3
• Sweden	1
• Finland	1
• Australia	1
Qualifications/ research career status ^a	
• Masters/PhD student	3
• Postdoctoral Fellow	2
• PhD Faculty	10
• Physician Faculty	6
• Nurse Faculty	3
• Dietician Faculty	1
• Other (eg business/entrepreneur)	1
Employment institution	
• University/research institute	17
• Health service	1
• Other	2

* 2 ECRN members did not attend (1 – Iran, 1 Australia)

^a some individuals reported more than one qualification/training background